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PERSONAL STORY

"Who will bully the bullies?"

In a disturbing account of an angry incident in London, Boris Johnson's old friend fights back against his detractors in the press

By Darius Guppy

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The *Spectator* recently published an article in which I argued that the BBC journalist Eddie Mair, as a member of the British media, was in no position to point his finger at my old friend Boris Johnson, the Mayor of London, and call him "a nasty piece of work". While many understood the point, the reaction on the part of a press which has taken umbrage at my consistent refusal to recognise a moral authority that I do not accept it possesses was less favourable.

One journalist in particular took it upon himself to resort to insult. He had approached me by email with a list of questions that seemed serious enough but which I sensed could be bait to occasion a meeting and thereby instil credibility to a subsequent character assassination, a favourite ploy of British journalists. I declined his invitation in the politest terms and with tedious predictability an article about me soon appeared in a prominent newspaper, its bad faith outmatched only by its incompetence.

In particular, it was the journalist's insulting of my wife which proved that he had not conducted even an iota's actual study. Had he done so, he would have realised that his calumny would trigger only one response.

That response came early one recent morning when, having discovered his address and flown into London from South Africa where I live, I waited for him to emerge from his house, chased him, and then, having knocked him to the ground, emptied over his head a sack of horse manure rendered slurry by the addition of bottled water – a concoction made possible courtesy of Hyde Park Riding School and the springs of Evian. The aim had been not to hurt him but to humiliate him as he had sought to humiliate my wife. And humiliate him is exactly what I did, in front of his neighbours who had poured out on to the street at the sound of his screams.

A click of the mouse is all that separates the journalist's embarrassment from worldwide dissemination because I had brought along two accomplices, who did not touch him, and whose role it was to film the events as they unfolded. But here is the difference. That click of the mouse did not occur – precisely because I saw no point in causing additional hurt to the journalist's family.

Did such considerations inform the *News of the World* when it published its video of Max Mosley's recreation with a group of ladies liberal with their affections? Did the *News of the World* ask itself: "How will this impact on Mr Mosley's family? What possible good will come of publishing these tapes? Will society become a better place as a consequence? Or will it become a darker one by pandering to the basest voyeuristic instincts in us all?"

Did it, or any of Britain's other newspapers, wrestle with similar questions on countless equivalent occasions?

Instead, the *News of the World* invoked a "public interest" defence – Fleet Street's favourite – the gist being that the wearing of supposedly Nazi-like apparel had justified Mr Mosley's exposure, an argument dismissed as patent sophistry by Mr Justice Eady in a high court judgment that is a masterpiece of prose and reasoning.

And when the wife of the journalist at the centre of this story emerged from her home to see me standing over her husband warning him never to repeat his mistake, did I bring

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her into it? Did I pour manure over her and attempt to humiliate her as her spouse had done my wife? No.

The sad truth is that, bar the odd exception, the most ruthless armed robbers I met in jail had more honour and more sense of code than the British media.

In fact, the real reason for some editors' desire to degrade is money, coupled with a psychological need to bring the rest of the population down to their own level. The response by the publicity-sensitive *Daily Mail* editor, Paul Dacre, to Justice Eady's judgment could hardly be more revealing:

> "... if mass-circulation newspapers ... don't have the freedom to write about scandal, I doubt whether they will retain their mass circulations ... If the *News of the World* can't carry such stories as the Mosley orgy, then it, and its political reportage and analysis [*sic*], will eventually probably die."

It is an argument that could be relied upon by the drug dealer: "I only give the people what they want. Were there no demand for my product, there'd be no market. I'm just a disciple of Adam Smith."

However, for me, the person who spreads the disease is in fact far more blameworthy than the one in whom the disease originates. And that is exactly how the media make money – just as Mr Dacre states – not by upholding "democracy", but by spreading sickness: an orgy here, a topless celebrity there, a beheading of a soldier somewhere else; all for our simple, pay-per-view, pay-as-you-read entertainment.

Britain is a vulgar and aggressive country. Step off the plane and it hits you in the face. Now travel back in time, perhaps only 50 years, to a pre-Murdochian age. Watch some television or listen to the radio or open a newspaper and compare. How sad. The truth is that the media know all of this yet bemoan Britain's moral decline, blind to just how implicated they are in that decline.

Lord Leveson asked the question: "Who guards the guardians?"

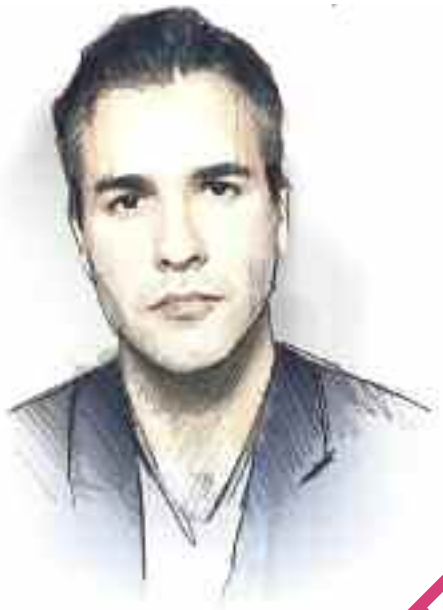
I beg your pardon? Murdoch, Dacre, Lebedev, Desmond et al – "guardians"?!

That surely is a term which implies leadership of some kind: a sense of moral authority and of trust; a notion of lifting the people, not degrading them.

The better question, it seems to me, would have been: "Who will bully the bullies?"

Leveson also quoted Thomas Jefferson: "Where the press is free and every man able to read, all is safe."

But there are huge assumptions here – the first being that the media are indeed "free". They are not. The British press is controlled by a handful of corporations in turn owned by a handful of rather unpleasant individuals, all with virtually identical agendas. The result is that consent is not reached through rational dialogue between the media and their audience, but instead is manufactured. One comes across very little that is genuinely novel or enlightening in Britain's media; the newspapers and television stations all essentially accept the same liberal, free-market line. The resulting uniformity is herd-like and dangerous, and the consequence is that we no longer have an intelligentsia to speak of. Whereas in countries such as France, where privacy laws are stronger, debate is in fact, counter-intuitively, far broader: from Marxist analysis to Marine Le Pen – a real difference; from the *Guardian* to the *Telegraph* – no real difference.



DAN MURRELL

Darius Guppy: "He sought to humiliate my wife"

The establishment woke up only when the victims were royalty

But what about instances such as the uncovering of the phone-hacking scandal? Surely a clear example of why our media should remain unfettered?

In fact, as anyone who had even the remotest knowledge of the workings of the British press could have told you decades before the arrest of the *News of the World*'s royal correspondent Clive Goodman, newspapers in this country – and not just those belonging to News International – were involved in all manner of illegal trespass on people's privacy, by no means limited to phone-hacking, and enjoyed corrupt relationships with the police. Why should it be that the establishment wakes up only when the victims of such trespass are the royal family?

The truth is that the British media are seldom ahead of the curve instead of behind it. An example: the press's catastrophic failure even to hint at impending financial meltdown. Or how about its analysis of Islam and politics in the Middle East? Embarrassing. The second, implied assumption in Jefferson's remark is that the media must be free to tell the truth. If we reach the point when the man on the street, while being entertained by what he reads or watches, believes not a word of it, then what is the point of a "free" press?

And the third assumption is that the average man will, upon receipt of truthful information, exercise his reason to arrive at rational decisions, in the process becoming a valuable contributor to a free society. It is here that Leveson's reference to "guardians" has meaning – because the media as prime purveyors of information have an educative function: to lead people out of the darkness and into the light.

Our politicians are complicit in what has been a long process of decadence, claiming that they defend a "free" press because of its emancipatory power, while in truth they care only for its manipulative power, believing in their Diana-like delusion that they can manipulate the journalists to their own ends more than the journalists will manipulate them.

For those of us with a less bleak view of humanity, let us hope that once the cycle's nadir is reached things will improve, and that a space will open up for a media that we can trust again. What form this eventuality might take I can only guess at but this I know: the least of its priorities will be profit. Perhaps, reminiscent of the 18th-century-type merchant who, his fortune made, rejects the Harvard Business School manual and puts his money into unprofitable land for honour rather than the bottom line, we will rediscover individuals ready to lose their shirt for love of their trade.

Cynicism yielding once more to ideals? I see Messrs Murdoch and Dacre entertained by my naivety and doubtless the usual barbs will follow from underlings who resent those who are not frightened of them. In the meantime, I will hope to bump into such people when they are separated from their laptops and cappuccinos.

The dogs bark but the caravan moves on and the reader will be heartened by confirmation that, unlike prime ministers and other timid souls, this particular caravan will never be deflected from its course by a few mongrels yapping in Wapping. ●

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